INSPIRE

KSH Sustainable Change for Inclusive Gender Equality

Intersectionality & sustainable equality work: pushback and resistance

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This document is for practitioners and policymakers implementing intersectional approaches to gender equality.

Working paper

This working paper is the result of a Knowledge Exchange Event organised by The Inspire Project in Vienna in September 2024. Participants engaged in a discussion based on the understanding that sustaining change for gender equality requires an intersectional approach. We examined different types of resistance and pushback often driven by those who benefit from existing power structures. We began by recognising that power is central to change, explored why intersectional equality encounters increased resistance, and progressed toward identifying solutions and best practices. Previously, we identified several challenges linked to adopting an intersectional approach for sustainable equality change, such as the lack of knowledge and understanding regarding the implications and definitions of intersectional equality work. The complexity of intersectionality arises as national policies and laws are often based on single axes of exclusion, making it challenging to collect intersectional data. Additionally, resistance to Intersectional Approaches exists because some topics are deemed taboo, such as race and gender identities, particularly trans identities. Other challenges include policy rollbacks, cultural inertia, institutional bias, and hierarchies of discrimination that prioritise certain forms of inequality over others, creating what is termed the "discrimination Olympics", in which diversity and inclusion issues compete for resources.

1. INSPIRE Insights about sustaining change for IGE

In this section, we explain general barriers identified by the KSH for implementing intersectional gender equality, as a starting point for the discussion.

At the structural level, a neoliberal system that is market-driven and values individualism, meritocracy, and excellence was identified as a key systemic barrier to sustainable equality. This system promotes discourses such as choice, independence, and gender neutrality, which implicitly and explicitly present the current status quo as suitable, rational, and justifiable, thereby hindering efforts to promote gender equality.

At the organisational level, the hierarchy of academic work, which prioritises research over teaching, management, and service, hinders progress toward inclusive gender equality. Additionally, institutional resistance manifests in various forms, including a lack of understanding of intersectional issues, outright denial of the importance of intersectional gender issues, provisional support that fails to translate into concrete actions, and challenges in integrating gender equality into broader institutional strategies. Other barriers include the epistemological exclusion of non-Western knowledge and the difficulty of addressing disciplinary-specific challenges. Moreover, discriminatory practices against those who require or provide care, as well as racism and the exclusion of women of color, constitute significant organisational barriers to change.

Solutions identified in the literature
- Intersectional perspectives are a theoretical and methodological tool for data collection and analysis. Qualitative research based on intersectional perspectives offers a nuanced understanding of how different forms of oppression intersect and affect individuals in various contexts.
- Strategies for overcoming resistance include incorporating gender and intersectionality into broader initiatives and linking these efforts to funding mechanisms, which can create tangible incentives for institutions to adopt and sustain change.
- To facilitate change, core values such as epistemic justice, care, and solidarity
- Value of teaching, service, and leadership activities alongside research. A deep understanding of inequality regimes and awareness of gender in intersection with other social categories are also crucial.
- Interventions should not be isolated efforts but rather integrated into the core strategies of research institutions.

3. KE key topics identified

During the knowledge exchange event, different examples and points were made about the challenges and strategies to implement intersectional perspectives in policy making and practices for gender equality.

Intersectionality in Policy and Institutional Change
- Institutionalising intersectionality presents many challenges; therefore, understanding intersectionality as a political strategy rather than merely a policy guide could be beneficial solution.
- There is resistance to intersectionality from some feminist actors and institutional structures, resulting in a form of exclusive inclusion.
- A form of resistance involves the use of euphemisms to address discrimination, such as "social safety" in place of "racism" and "sexual" harassment.
- Institutional constraints exist for marginalised researchers regarding access to resources and recognition.
- Biases in research and technological development regarding gendered innovations have been identified (e.g., gendered impacts of prostheses).
- There is a growing need for transdisciplinary approaches to inclusivity in scientific research.
- Funding agencies are key in promoting intersectional innovation.

Implementation of Intersectional EDI Strategies

- We require examples of intersectional EDI strategies in different universities and organisations.
- It is essential to create safe spaces within organisations for marginalised groups.
- Data collection and policy adaptation for these groups are necessary.
- The role of leadership in embedding intersectional approaches demands leaders who possess a strong understanding of intersectional gender studies.

Data, Monitoring, and Institutional Accountability

- The burden of data collection on gender units and the challenge of using collected data effectively.
- The role of the EU Commission in enforcing accountability for GEPs is essential for progress.
- There is a tension between data-driven approaches and qualitative dimensions of equality work. Gaining a deeper understanding of this tension is vital for practitioners in the field. Striking a balance between both approaches could result in more holistic and impactful equality initiatives that incorporate personal experiences alongside empirical evidence.

Activism and Resistance in EDI Work

- Balancing activism with the institutional leverage of power is challenging. Activism might have negative consequences for individuals, such as isolation and profiling.
- Resistance from anti-gender and anti-trans groups still exists within academia, and activists face it more frequently.
- Alliances and coalitions are crucial in promoting gender and EDI policies.
- Capacity building for institutional accountability is essential.

Key Strategies for Sustainable Change for Intersectional equality

- Engaging privileged groups in gender equality work.
- Recognising and addressing the emotional labor in EDI work.
- Raising awareness and fostering dialogue across different institutional levels.
- The power of language in making intersectional concepts accessible.
- The importance of trust and community-building in driving change.
- The need to identify key actors and allies within powerful institutions.
- The role of student voices in institutional change.
- The strategic use of positionality and personal experiences in advocacy.
- We need to address and highlight the tensions between inclusion and power.

Meritocracy, Excellence, and Institutional Power

Important to discuss and address directly, maybe as research agenda:

- The myth surrounding the incompatibility of meritocracy and equality.
- The significance of scientific metrics in fostering exclusion (alternative methods for assessing quality and excellence).
- The influence of leadership in crafting policies and defining excellence.

4. KSH leaders' reflections

Achieving sustainable change for intersectional approaches to gender equality **requires leadership that is deeply knowledgeable about intersectional equality.** Leaders must not only be committed to equality but also possess the expertise to understand the structural and systemic barriers that hinder progress. Leadership with knowledge in gender and EDI is essential for formulating policies

that are not merely symbolic but effectively address inequalities. This involves tailoring Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) to specific institutional and cultural contexts, ensuring that policies include clear actions, responsibilities, and accountability mechanisms. Without explicit consequences for inaction, efforts to implement meaningful change remain superficial.

Driving change for intersectional approaches to gender equality requires **a multi-level approach**. Institutions must **increase the representation of marginalised groups** in knowledge production, ensuring that diverse perspectives shape research and policy development; **actions must be realistic, concrete, and time-bound** to foster measurable progress and fostering **spaces for discussion and building coalitions across different levels** of the institution strengthens collective engagement. Finally, **prioritising care and solidarity as core institutional values** ensures that equality efforts are not solely bureaucratic but also embedded in the organisational culture.

Resistance and power dynamics play a crucial role in shaping institutional responses to intersectional gender equality. **Support from academic and student communities is essential** in legitimising equality policies and empowering change agents. Students, for example, wield significant power as key stakeholders in universities, as institutions often respond to their demands due to financial and reputational considerations. Furthermore, **activism within and outside institutions remains a driving force for change**, particularly in addressing the politics of care—ensuring that care work is recognised, valued, and fairly distributed. However, institutions frequently acknowledge gender-related problems only when issues gain public attention or cause reputational damage. This reactive approach highlights **the need for proactive, bottom-up initiatives** that engage institutional actors in recognising the depth of marginalisation and the importance of sustained action. Moreover, learning from strong social movements and tracing their impact on policy provides valuable insights for institutional strategies.

Sustaining change also requires **addressing the emotional and affective dimensions of gender equality work**. Those leading change efforts often encounter significant resistance, making it essential to provide supportive mechanisms. The organisations play a crucial role in ensuring that gender experts and equality officers hold a stable position, which enables them to exert some influence. Additionally, explicit and visible backing from colleagues is vital. Furthermore, creating safe spaces for EDI officers to share their experiences and frustrations represents an important step toward tackling burnout and fostering collective resilience. Finally, activists, scholars, and change agents must balance their efforts with self-care, acknowledging that compromise is sometimes necessary for progress.

Engaging privileged groups, particularly senior white men, in conversations about gender equality is necessary for achieving broad-based institutional buy-in. Understanding what motivates these individuals to support change can help in framing gender equality as a shared institutional goal rather than a zero-sum game. Raising awareness about privilege and power is often met with resistance, as it challenges individuals' sense of accomplishment. While conversations about privilege can provoke defensiveness, framing them within research and capacity-building initiatives can create constructive engagement. A well-trained facilitator can help navigate these discussions, ensuring they lead to actionable outcomes rather than backlash.

Data-driven approaches serve as valuable tools for monitoring and evaluating progress, helping to demonstrate the impact of initiatives and motivate institutions to maintain their efforts. Many organizations collect data without utilizing it effectively, placing an additional burden on gender units without driving meaningful change. However, caution is needed to avoid reducing gender equality to numerical targets alone, as this can obscure the qualitative dimensions of systemic change. **Accountability mechanisms**, such as proper audits for GEPs, are necessary to ensure that

commitments translate into action. Institutions that fail to show clear progress should face financial consequences, such as funding being withdrawn or redirected.

Language is a powerful tool in fostering inclusion. **Simplifying complex concepts and making them accessible** ensures that intersectionality discussions are not dismissed as overly theoretical or exclusive. A human rights-based approach to intersectionality can help frame equality as a shared concern, emphasizing that all individuals have vulnerabilities and that systemic inequalities affect everyone differently.

Finally, one of the major obstacles to change is the lack of political will. Academic institutions are not immune to the anti-gender discourses present in broader society, and even within gender movements, there can be tensions—such as resistance from some feminist groups toward trans-inclusion. Addressing these challenges requires building alliances, advocating for gender knowledge to remain in curricula, and using powerful institutional frameworks like the European Union's normative agenda to push for accountability. Capacity-building is crucial, especially for those in management positions, to ensure that intersectional approaches to gender equality are integrated into institutional decision-making.